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Education reform progress reported

NATIONAL SURVEY LIFTS KENTUCKY FROM 43RD TO 34TH

By Art Jester

AJESTER@HERALD-LEADER.COM

Kentucky has moved up from 43rd to 34th nationally in education over the last 13 years, proof of "substantial progress" with the state's two education reform efforts, a new report concludes.

The Kentucky Long-Term Policy Research Center, an independent, state-funded agency, ranked the 50 states on the basis of 11 educational indicators, such as the percentage of citizens with high school diplomas and two-year and four-year college degrees as well as students' scores on national standardized tests.

The center's findings corresponded with two other national rankings. Kentucky was 34th in Education Week's Quality Counts 2007 Achievement Index and was 31st in the Morgan Quinto 2006-2007 Smartest State Index.

The report covered the years 1992 to 2005, the most recent year for which figures were available. The General Assembly passed the Kentucky Education Reform Act for K-12 in 1990 and the higher education reforms in 1997.

Amy Watts, the center's staff member who compiled the report, wrote: "This improvement has been driven primarily by the 4th and 8th grade science scores, 4th grade reading and the steady decline in the dropout rate from 5.6 percent in 1996 to 3.3 percent in 2004."

The report's conclusion is "convincing," said Robert F. Sexton, executive director of the Prichard Committee for Academic Excellence, a citizens' group that promotes education reform.

"To an older generation, the saying about education in Kentucky was always, 'Thank God for Mississippi,'" Sexton said, meaning that at least one state always ranked lower than Kentucky.

"This is far from the case now," said Sexton, who is on the center's board but was not involved in producing the report. "The challenge is how to move forward."

State Sen. Majority Leader Dan Kelly, R-Springfield, who has sponsored education legislation, said: "I think everybody recognizes we've made progress in Kentucky, but obviously not at the rate we anticipated or hoped for. There's still lots of work to do."

Brad Cowgill, interim president of the state Council on Postsecondary Education, said: "This report is good news for Kentucky. It represents a more comprehensive way of understanding education progress at all levels in the commonwealth."

But Cowgill warned against complacency, such as in the "Double the Numbers" campaign to double the number of Kentuckians with bachelor's degrees to 800,000 by 2020.

Cowgill is chairman of the center's board, but he also was not involved in producing the report.

Watts said Kentucky has achieved "real educational progress, compared to our past and relative to the nation." But she noted that Kentucky still trails two-thirds of the 50 states.

"We should celebrate our progress while remembering that educational reform is not a destination but an ongoing process," she wrote.

Sexton said he hoped the report's findings are disseminated widely.

"The frustration is so many people don't understand where Kentucky started and how far we've come," he said. "This is by no means victory, but we're better off than the last generation."

Sexton said enthusiasm has waned lately for the long push toward the reform goals.

"We need a big boost of energy drink," he said.

Reach Art Jester at (859) 231-3489 or 1-800-950-6397, ext. 3489.

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